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Israel's move to ban 37 NGOs from Gaza draws global outrage

• United Nations blasts 'outrageous' strangulation of critical aid efforts; European Union warns decision would block 'life-saving' support for starving civilians

JERUSALEM: Israel threatened to ban 37 aid organisations from operating in Gaza starting on Thursday unless they submit to strict new guidelines requiring detailed surveillance of Palestinian staff, a move that has drawn sharp condemnation from the United Nations and the European Union .

Several NGOs have told *AFP* the new rules will have a major impact on food and medical shipments to Gaza, at a time when humanitarian organisations say the amount of aid getting in is inadequate to the devastated territory's needs.

Israel's deadline for NGOs to provide the details expires at midnight on Wednesday.

Israel, framing the crackdown as a necessary security measure, accused humanitarian groups of hiding militant ties, a move critics say would further strangle life-saving support to the enclave.

Israel's Diaspora Affairs Ministry spokeperson Gilad Zwick, accused widely recognised and reputable organisations of involvement in terrorism, offering no evidence beyond the claim that "we just know".

Adding more pressure on the groups, he said, "We certainly won't accept any cooperation that is just for show, simply to get an extension".

The ministry had said in a statement on Wednesday that the move was part of Israel's decision to "strengthen and update" regulations governing the activities of international NGOs in the Palestinian territory.

A fragile ceasefire has been in place in Gaza since October, following a deadly war waged by Israel in Gaza after October 7.

Israel specified that "acts of de-legitimising Israel" or denial of events surrounding October 7 attack would be "grounds for licence withdrawal".

It says the new regulation aims to prevent bodies it accuses of supporting terrorism from operating in the Palestinian territories.

Israel has singled out international medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF), alleging that it had two employees who were members of Palestinian groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

Apart from MSF, some of the 37 NGOs to be hit with the ban are the Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision International, CARE and Oxfam, according to the list given by Zwick.

'Guarantee access '

Meanwhile, the United Nations rights chief Volker Turk On Wednesday described Israel's decision as "outrageous", calling on states to urgently insist Israel shift course.

"Israel's suspension of numerous aid agencies from Gaza is outrageous," he said in a statement, warning that "such arbitrary suspensions make an already intolerable situation even worse for the people of Gaza".

The European Union also warned that Israel's decision would block "life-saving" assistance from reaching Palestinians.

"The EU has been clear: the NGO registration law cannot be implemented in its current form," EU humanitarian chief Hadja Lahbib posted on X.

"IHL (international humanitarian law) leaves no room for doubt: aid must reach those in need," Lahbib wrote.

The foreign ministers of ten countries, including France and the United Kingdom, had already urged Israel to "guarantee access" to aid in the Gaza Strip, where they said the humanitarian situation remains "catastrophic".

In a territory with 2.2 million inhabitants, "1.3 million people still require urgent shelter support", the ministers of Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Japan, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland said.

While a deal for a ceasefire that started on October 10 stipulated the entry of 600 trucks per day, only 100 to 300 are carrying humanitarian aid, according to NGOs and the United Nations.—Agencies

LAHORE: Fireworks light up the midnight sky over Liberty Chowk during New Year celebrations.—White Star

14 killed in bus-van collision

TOBA TEK SINGH: At least 14 passengers were killed and 16 others injured in a head-on collision between a bus carrying players of a university and a van on Jhang-Faisalabad road near the Adda Faqeer Di Kulli area on Wednesday.

The players of the University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences were on their way to Lahore to take part in various games at a sports event. According to Rescue 1122, police and the district administration, the accident occurred due to speeding by both vehicles when one was overtaking while the other was crossing a sugarcane-laden tractor trolley.

As a result, nine passengers died on the spot, while five others succumbed to their injuries on the way to or at the DHQ Hospital in Jhang.

Deputy Commissioner Ali Akbar Bhinder and DPO Bilal Iftikhar Kiani visited the accident site and the hospital and supervised the rescue operation.— Correspondent

World bids farewell to year of tariffs, turmoil and truces

SYDNEY: New Year's Eve revellers toasted the end of 2025 on Wednesday, waving goodbye to a year packed with President Donald Trump's tariffs, a fragile Gaza truce and vain hopes for peace in Ukraine, concluding one of the warmest years on record.

In 2025, stifling heat stoked wildfires in Europe, droughts in Africa and deadly rains across Southeast Asia.

Celebrations in Sydney, the self-proclaimed "New Year's capital of the world", carried a sombre tinge. Barely two weeks have passed since a father and son allegedly opened fire on a Jewish festival at Bondi Beach, killing 15 people.

Parties paused for a minute of silence at 11pm as the Sydney Harbour Bridge was bathed in white light.

"Right now, the joy that we usually feel at the start of a new year is tempered by the sadness of the old," Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said.

Hundreds of thousands of spectators lined the foreshore as nine tons of fireworks eventually exploded over the Harbour. Security was tighter than usual, with heavily armed police patrolling the crowds.

Celebrations rippled globally, starting in Pacific nations like Kiribati and New Zealand. More than 2 million people were expected at Brazil's Copacabana Beach, while Hong Kong cancelled its display to pay homage to 161 victims of a housing estate fire.

The transition follows a year of cultural shifts and loss. Labubu dolls became a craze, thieves plundered the Louvre and K-pop stars BTS returned.

The world also lost zoologist Jane Goodall, the Vatican chose a new pope and the assassination of right-wing activist Charlie Kirk laid bare deep US divisions.

Politically, Trump returned to the White House in January, launching a tariff blitz that rattled markets.

In the Middle East, US pressure secured a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in October. The war has killed more than 70,000 Palestinians, according to the health ministry in Gaza.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine grinds toward a four-year anniversary without a truce.

The coming months promise the Winter Olympics in Italy and the largest football World Cup in history across North America. Additionally, NASA's Artemis II mission intends to circle the moon, though investors face questions over whether the artificial intelligence boom has become a market bubble.—AFP

Dip in polio cases despite missed vaccination targets

By Ikram Junaidi

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan has claimed significant progress in its fight against poliovirus after cases more than halved in 2025, even though nearly 800,000 children were missed during the year's final nationwide vaccination campaign.

According to a statement issued by the country's polio eradication programme, reported cases of the incurable paralytic disease fell to 30 in 2025, a steep decline from 74 the previous year. No new cases have been reported anywhere in the country since September.

However, health experts have urged caution, noting that the country — one of only two in the world, alongside neighbouring Afghanistan, where polio remains endemic — has seen premature declarations of success before.

The data released by the programme highlights the immense logistical and social challenges facing health workers on the ground. While six vaccination campaigns were conducted throughout the year, the most recent nationwide drive, held in mid-December, failed to reach its complete target.

Aiming to vaccinate 45.4 million children under the age of five, health workers reached 44.6 million. The programme cited "refusals reported from across the country" as a primary reason for the gap, pointing to the lingering issue of vaccine hesitancy and misinformation in conservative areas.

Despite the official optimism, a polio expert, speaking on condition of anonymity, warned against complacency, noting the virus's history of resurgence.

Modi asked to explain China's claim on mediating Pak-India truce

NEW DELHI: India's opposition Congress party said on Wednesday it was concerned by Beijing's claims on helping broker India-Pakistan truce after the military flare-up in May and asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to clarify the issue.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Tuesday that the conflict between India and Pakistan in May was among the contentious matters mediated by Beijing in 2025.

India has repeatedly rejected claims made by US President Donald Trump that Washington had mediated the ceasefire.

India's Ministry of External Affairs has not reacted to the claim made by Mr Wang. But it has maintained that the ceasefire with Islamabad was not the result of mediation. The decision to stop the firing was taken after the Pakistani director general of military operations had called his Indian counterpart, New Delhi has said.

"China's claims of mediating between India and Pakistan are concerning — not just because they contradict what has been told to the country's people so far, but also because they appear to mock our national security," Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said in a social media post.

Mr Wang was commenting on China's role in a tricky world. "This year, local wars and cross-border conflicts flared up more often than at any time since the end of WWII [World War II]," Mr Wang said at a conference on China's foreign relations in Beijing. "Geopolitical turbulence continued to spread."

To build lasting peace, "we have taken an objective and just stance, and focused on addressing both symptoms and root causes", the Chinese minister added.

"Following this Chinese approach to settling hotspot issues, we mediated in northern Myanmar, the Iranian nuclear issue, the tensions between Pakistan and India, the issues between Palestine and Israel, and the recent conflict between Cambodia and Thailand," he claimed.—Correspondent

Bangladesh mourns ex-premier Khaleda Zia with state funeral

• Dozens line Dhaka streets to honour political icon; toppled Sheikh Hasina sends condolences • Modi hopes Zia's legacy can mend Delhi-Dhaka ties

DHAKA: Bangladesh bid farewell on Wednesday to former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in a state funeral that drew vast crowds to mourn a towering leader whose career defined the country's politics for decades.

Zia, the first woman to serve as prime minister in the South Asian nation of 170 million people, died on Tuesday at age 80.

Flags flew at half-staff, and thousands of security officers lined the roads as her body was carried through the streets of Dhaka, by a vehicle draped in the national flag's colors.

A sea of mourners gathered outside parliament and packed streets leading to it, many waving national and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) flags, before prayers were held over her coffin.

Despite years of ill health, Ms Zia had vowed to campaign in elections set for Feb 12.

This will mark the first vote since Sheikh Hasina's ouster. Zia's BNP is widely considered a front-runner, and her son Tarique Rahman, 60 is seen as a potential prime minister.

The interim government, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus, declared three days of national mourning and an elaborate state funeral. Yunus said Bangladesh had "lost a great guardian".

Zia's body was interred alongside her late husband, Ziaur Rahman. Leaders and armed forces' members laid wreaths, and a bugle sounded as the burial took place.

In a statement, Mr Rahman said "the country mourns the loss of a guiding presence that shaped its democratic aspirations".

His mother, he added, "endured repeated arrests, denial of medical care, and relentless persecution," but "her resilience ... was unbreakable."

Indian PM Narendra Modi expressed hope that Zia's "vision and legacy will guide our partnership", a positive message despite strained Dhaka-New Delhi relations.

Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, New Delhi's foreign minister, attended the service, marking the highest-level Indian visit since Hasina's overthrow. He met Tarique Rahman and conveyed India's "deepest condolences".

Zia was jailed for corruption in 2018 under Hasina's government, which also blocked her from travelling abroad for medical treatment. "I pray for the eternal peace and forgiveness of Begum Khaleda Zia's soul," Hasina said in a post on social media by her now-banned Awami League party.—AFP

A MASSIVE crowd gathers for the funeral of former Bangladesh prime minister Khaleda Zia at the Parliament House premises in Dhaka.—AFP

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